

Notes on Sounds of the Field: Writing about Sound and Sport (Fall 2010)

My fall 2010 course, entitled “Sounds of the Field: Writing About Sound and Sport” is an experiment in working together with students on a new area of research—the sounds of mass sport in North America—that constitutes a critique of my discipline, ethnomusicology, and its focus on the exotic and the artful. I aim to enable students to use their expertise as “native speakers” of the language of sport fandom, and native listeners to its sounds, as a sounding board for writing and thinking about how (culturally situated) senses, particularly hearing, and ways of being social are intimately linked. In the process I hope to teach them the ethnographic trick of making the familiar strange—of articulating their sensory experience of sport in the empirically invested prose of field texts, so that they can construct that experience as ethnographic data and analyze it. And I hope to teach them to use theoretical texts constructively and carefully, as building blocks for their own statements on how sound works socially in sport. In the course, we begin by writing a brief Memo that connects two key practices and genres for the course: writing a critical theoretical precis; and commenting on a fieldnote from a theoretical perspective. The Memo also explores the first area of content in the course—sounds from the perspective of fans as a kind of “society,” or in the metaphor that structures the course “the arena.” We then turn from the sounds of fandom in “the arena” to those that enable athletes to act on “the field” of play. We read a new set of theorists who think epistemologically about the senses and how they enable us to act. We write a field narrative (Writing Project 1), using the sounds on the field of a particular game to comment on sound as a way of knowing and acting. We turn to “circulation,” reading ethnomusicological texts on national anthems and identity, and writing a new fieldnote about the musical media that are part of sport, and that circulate outside of particular sporting events. Our final paper, Writing Project 2, is a short ethnographic paper—drawing on the elements of the genre we’ve learned thus far—which pulls together our fieldnotes on sound for fans, players, and audiences not present at the game, and makes our own contribution to the discourse on what sound has to do with sport and society.

There are several distinctive features of the course note: first, it tries to treat students as “experts” or “native speakers” who know and participate in narratives and languages of sport. To this end, we use a Wordpress site as a place for students to gather popular texts that articulate a popular discourse on sound, and we discuss and analyze these texts together in class. Second, it tries to make the pre-texts of fieldwork—jottings and fieldnotes—public, highlighting the ways that representation and writing are always already part of the research process. We use Wordpress to share and discuss our fieldnotes and field recordings; and we use Twitter to collaboratively construct a shared “stream” of field jottings on a game, documenting the ways a group of 5-10 students saw and heard a game in real time. (I am considering writing an article on the use of social media in fieldwork—a topic that has not been discussed among ethnomusicologists, to my knowledge.) Third, since ethnomusicology has shied away from mass culture and has often focused on elite / art musical traditions (albeit those of the “Other”), the course tries to engage students in reading a disciplinary canon (such as texts on anthems and national identity) and a counter-canon (such as texts on “participatory discrepancies,” which, while widely read, also offer a sharp critique of ethnomusicology’s subject matter and methods).